DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 387 824 CS 215 093

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TITLE Theorizing in Practice: Tutor Training "Live from the VAX Lab."
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; Computer Assisted Instruction; Computer Networks; *Cooperative Learning; *Electronic Mail; Higher Education; Online Systems; Student Needs; Teacher Student Relationship; *Writing Exercises; Writing Laboratories; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Dialogic Communication; Marquette University WI; *Tutor Training

ABSTRACT

In training courses for writing tutors, an electronic mail forum is a particularly useful writing-to-learn activity because it gives tutors-in-training important experience with the collaborative intellectual processes at the heart of writing centers. In one particular class for tutors at Marquette University, Wisconsin, the assignment for the forum called for "a weekly screenful of e-mail commentary in which you discuss, question, and tie together (or tear apart) the course readings and your writing center experiences." One of the great advantages of this method over individual journal writing was that everybody, not just the instructor, got to read what everybody else had to say about a given topic. E-mail forums also recast the construction of authority in a course, a particularly relevant effect to strive for in a training course for tutors since they themselves will have to confront issues of authority in their tutoring. A series of excerpts from student discussions shows the extent to which e-mail forums can become an occasion for theorizing about the writing and teaching process. The e-mail assignment changed and intensified the course content by engaging students in the knowledge-making at the heart of teaching composition. (TB)

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Theorizing in Practice: Tutor Training "Live from the VAX Lab"

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By grouping the four of us at this metaphorically round tale to talk about computers and writing centers, the convention planners have invited a many-faceted discussion. The particular facet that I have been exploring and that I want to discuss today concerns my tutor training class.

My title, as you can see at the top of the handout, is "Theorizing in Practice: Tutor Training 'Live from the VAX Lab.'" I'll be referring to the handout, but not discussing it in detail. It contains excerpts from a series of e-mail forums written by students in my tutor-training class at Marquette. I've assigned weekly e-mail forums in this class the past two autumn semesters, and I have found that using this medium as an adjunct to class discussion carries the many pedagogical benefits of electronic discourse we've heard talked about at this 4 C's--it fosters equal participation, it de-centers authority, it invites inherently experimental and exploratory discussions, and its visible, quasi-oral language opens new textual possibilities.

But my purpose today is less to review the nature of e-mail discourse and more to argue that in classes for tutors, an e-mail forum is a particularly useful writing-to-learn activity because it gives tutors-in-training important experience with the collaborative intellectual processes at the heart of writing centers. In my classes, the tutors-in-training have flourished on e-mail, using it to exchange stories, reflect upon practice, and construct their authority as peer tutors. Their experience on e-mail does not substitute for direct observation of and practice with the facilitative tutoring methods which I think we all agree are essential to successful writing centers. But the e-mail discussions played a crucial role in helping the students understand the theoretical assumptions behind my espousal of those facilitative methods. The excerpts on the handout, from Fall 1993 class forums, illustrate, I hope, the points I want to make.

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As the phrase "theorizing in practice" in my title suggests, what I want to emphasize is that the collaborative involvement fostered by an e-mail forum not only provides students with valuable discursive experience, but enriches their ability to make sense of composition theory and to engage in the reflective practice that extends and builds both theory and practice.

The second phrase of my title comes from the first excerpt on your handout, from the week that Trish led the forum. This was an asynchronous conference, but she and her classmates consistently invoked their audience as "live," immediately present as interlocutors. They called the forum the Party Line and often began, "Hello, Party Liners!" The Party Line exchanges also match what has been labeled "group e-mail" or "e-mail discussion group." Students wrote and sent their entries through the OpenVMS utility on Marquette's VAX system. I just used technical jargon to call the Party Line an "asynchronous conference," but I will mainly refer to it as an electronic or e-mail forum. I use forum partly to distinguish what we did from the conferencing/consultation that occurs in all writing centers, with or without computers, and partly to emphasize the forum as a site for serious and open discussion.

The assignment for the forum called for "a weekly screenful of e-mail commentary in which you discuss, question, and tie together (or tear apart) the course readings and your writing center experiences." Class met for 75 minutes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Each Tuesday night a different student was responsible for posting a message that laid out issues for the week's e-mail discussion. He or she kept track of responses, sent out a wrap-up statement the following Monday, and led a half-hour summarizing discussion in class the next day. My own involvement in the discussions took place in class, not on-line.

The e-mail assignment takes the place of the journals I used to ask the tutoring students to keep for reflection on both course readings and their writing center experiences. One of the great benefits of this move away from private journals, I quickly discovered, was that <u>everybody</u>, not just I, got to read what everybody else had to say about a given topic. A prime example is the detailed renditions of their idiosyncratic composing processes that they wrote about in response to

Trish's invitation. I've given you only a taste of their responses in section two of the handout. This particular week's forum ran to nine single-spaced pages on my printer. The conversation wiped out assumptions such as Trish's that there is one ideal way to go about writing, and it provided us with 13 sets of case study data to draw on during class discussions through the rest of the term. This past fall, the same readings again engendered a particularly useful, but different, set of responses. This time, nearly everyone was a self-proclaimed last minute one-drafter. "What I want to know," wrote Jill, one of the deadline pushers, "is what exactly compels us to wait for the deadline pressure and anxiety before writing out the ideas we've probably been processing for days. I've come up with three possible reasons so far (please feel free to add your own).

1- Procrastination

2- Fear

3- Sport."

Jill elaborated on the dynamics of each possibility, and her entry became an important touchstone for us. We increasingly understood procrastination--by tutors, writing center students, and even professors--to be motivated by fear and (foolish) sport. Having shared the fears and acknowledged the foolishness, over the next few weeks a number of students began to report that they were moving away from the procrastinator's model and allowing themselves time for a second look at their papers and, thus, for revision.

For my part as teacher, when I reflected upon the impact of Jill's "sport" comments as I was preparing this talk, I realized another advantage of e-mail discussions: I can remember what people have said on e-mail better than I can remember what they've said in class, and thus I can remind us all of these comments in class discussion weeks later. (Plus, I have a print out of each week's forum.) No doubt my sharpened memory comes at least partly from the fact that I have a visual mind that has been steeped in texts, but it also has to come from that fact that when reading e-mail, I, like the students, am able to focus on the content of the discussion without worrying

about who else is competing for the floor and without being distracted by my obligations to orchestrate the discussion.

However, the nuances of textual impact were something to be discovered as the e-mail forums unfolded. When I designed the assignment, my primary intention for the change from journals to e-mail was to recast the construction of authority in the course. That is, I wanted to push the students past their tendency to cast me as the expert interpreter of the readings I assigned. Believing strongly in the notion that learning takes place through conversation and reflection, I wanted to foster collaborative activity that would be less directly under my professorial gaze than it is in most classrooms, and even in student journals, which, let's face it, are written for the most part for professors' eyes.

One of my most important underlying assumptions here is that the central task of tutor-training programs is helping new tutors become the collaborators and facilitators envisioned by Matt and Brad in the excerpts in the third section of your handout, page two. A crucial goal for tutor trainers should be to help tutors negotiate the paradoxes of authority embodied in peer tutoring, to help them, as John Trimbur says, "put the terms 'peer' and 'tutor' together in practical and meaningful ways" ("Peer tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?" *Writing Center Journal* [1987]: 24).

Many students arrive in my tutoring class thinking that social intuition and good grammar are all they will need to draw upon as tutors, to be the efficient teachers and editors that they expect they should be. The readings I assign suggest far more complex scenarios. We read about research and theory in articles from academic journals, a genre that most of the students have never encountered before, and the students often respond by constructing me as *the* authority on "theory," and the authority of theory itself as therefore professorial, something unlikely to be possessed by *peer* tutors. But as I've indicated, I think it important to detach them from this reliance upon me as knowledge generator, and from the idea that a teacher/tutor is primarily a knowledge generator. The parallels here to the authority both used and fostered in facilitative as

opposed to directive tutoring are, of course, crucial.

If the teacher and assigned texts are the only authority in the classroom, students have the option of accepting or rejecting that authority, but are not likely to take on the responsibility of scrutinizing or modifying it any more than a writer is likely to take responsibility for decisions about revision if a tutor tries to tell him or her what to say on the next draft. In the place of such passivity, I wanted the tutors to develop their own authority as peers, as tutors, and as writers who would examine carefully the relevance of the course readings to the tutoring sessions they were observing at the writing center and, eventually, to the sessions they would lead there.

The e-mail forum gave these writing center apprentices concrete but informal opportunities to experience, as Trimbur puts it, "the authority co-learners invest in each other" (1987, p. 26). The forum became a sounding board for the tutors' stories about experimenting with this new kind of authority. One of the best examples comes in the next excerpt on page two of your handout, in which Vicki tells her classmates how her effort to be the "perfect tutor" turned her first solo writing conference into the "perfect nightmare."

When Hawisher and Moran wrote about electronic mail for *College English* two years ago ("Electronic mail and the writing Instructor" [1993]: 627-643), they suggested that its pedagogical uses would be "inevitably project-oriented." But my experience with the forum in two classes suggests that asynchronous exchanges can also be valuable as an alternative to journals as a venue for the informal expressive writing that Toby Fulwiler and others advocate to help people develop insight, articulate ideas, and solve problems. Here let me refer you to the comments under "Going Public" on the handout, on the third page. Indeed, I'm suggesting that the public nature of the writing on the forums makes them even more valuable than individual journals, especially when collaboration constitutes not just a method of learning in the class, but a conceptual goal.

Ultimately, then, I want to argue that in the context of the tutor-training course, the value of a Party Line lies not in rehearsing for class discussion or in rephrasing the readings, but in on-

going theorizing. The excerpted comments in the final section of the handout illustrate ways in which the students' written conversation made the theory in the readings "real" in its specific applicability to their experience, and made the writing center praxis "real" in its connections with published accounts and claims.

I think that some of the most important work the students did on the forum was read what each other had to say. Their experience of writing and reading through a medium that eludes the strictures of many academic discourse conventions precisely suits the collaborative enterprise of writing centers: that is, vesting authority in help-seekers, thriving on conversation and diversity. The e-mail forums enact Singley and Boucher's ("Dialogue in Tutor Training" *Writing Center Journal* [1988] 11-22) argument that "conversation--the form of communication we use for tutoring sessions--should structure all aspects of a peer tutoring program" (11).

By writing to each other about their own experiences as writers and tutors, the Party Liners created a rich lode of raw data about composing, its satisfactions, and its uncertainties, a lode upon which each could draw to construct his or her own approach to tutoring. The Party Line contributed to the process of putting theory into practice by helping the students see in each other both the potential and the puzzlement that they would find in their tutees. A few weeks after Trish made her request for tales of multi-drafting versus single-drafting experiences, Ken led off the forum by asking, "Where did you gather your tools to help you along in your pursuits for academic discourse. Was it in the freshmen English program or maybe in high school?" (They had just read Eleanor Kutz's essay, "Between Students' Language and Academic Discourse: Interlanguage as Middle Ground" *College English* [1986]: 385-96). Abby responded that she found this "kind of a difficult and creepy question. I never really thought of myself as actively pursuing academic discourse, but I suppose I did at some point." Others agreed. It <u>was</u> creepy; they <u>hadn't</u> thought about it as something they learned explicitly. But they somehow did write it, and so they went on to explore how, why, and how to help others do the same.

Assignments on these topics are standard in peer-tutoring courses, but when the request comes from the peers themselves, not the professor, and when the writing is done in anticipation of a group response, the dynamics change. These requests from classmates, on this novel medium, opened up a de-centered conversation for a multi-faceted audience, a rhetorical situation quite unlike the evaluative measuring against a norm that is usually implicit in writing done for a teacher. Class members functioned not just as audience for each other, but as co-learners--co-theorizers. A rhetoric of "what do you all think?" and "tell us what your experience has been" came to predominate. The students' experience—as writers, students, observers, tutees, and tutors—became a major text of the course. It was a text they were themselves composing even as they were composing themselves, and each other, as tutors. Theorizing—connecting experience with the readings and using those connections as a basis for making recommendations for practice—became a matter of communication and helpfulness, not performance.

Let me end by saying that the e-mail forum enacted the recursiveness of both learning and composing. It gave students essential experience in reflective practice. It illustrated that writing is difficult and profoundly complicated for nearly everyone. The students came to know that the answer to this difficulty is not to teach everyone to do what you or I would do, but to engage students in dialogue through which they make their own discoveries and their own decisions. On e-mail the tutors-in-training engaged in an analogous dialogue about the theory/practice harmonies and incongruities that all composition professionals confront.

The e-mail assignment turned out to be far more than a device for encouraging greater participation in discussion or more interesting student journals. Rather, it changed and intensified the course content by engaging the students in the knowledge-making at the heart of teaching composition.

Theorizing in Practice: Tutor Training "Live from the VAX Lab"

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1995 Conference on College Composition and Communication, Washington, D.C.

Excerpts from e-mail forums written for The Processes of Writing, an upper division class for writing center tutors, during Fall 1993. Students used their own names on all messages, but pseudonyms are substituted here.

# # #

1. From Trish's Lead-Off entry, Week Seven

"Subj: What could be funner than my vaxweek the same as midterms? A root canal, maybe...

LIVE FROM THE VAX LAB--IT'S TUESDAY NIGHT!"

Trish is a multi-drafter, but she's writing on-line. After some kvetching about having to lead the forum during mid-term week, she gets "down to business":

"Alright, now what's up with the Harris article ["Composing Behaviors of One- and Multi-Draft Writers," College English 51 (1989): 627-43] we had to read for today? It's really got me thinkin'. You know, the one about one- and multi-draft writers? The thing I don't get is . . . ." Trish describes how she was taught to revise, and revise some more. According to her high school teachers, "there was no such thing as what Harris calls a mental 'pre-text,' and even if there were, my teachers evidently didn't care much about it. . . .

"What do you do? Do you wait until the argument is formed clearly . . . before you even consider taking pen in hand? Or do you have to get your ideas out on paper? . . . What are the benefits of one approach vs. the other? Can we even make a judgment here?"

The Harris article, and this class, have drastically changed her own thinking about composing, she reports. Previously, "if I had come in contact with a one-drafter at the writing center, I would probably have passed them off as being lazy (I'm serious!) and sat them down with some blank paper to do outlines and bubble diagrams.

"What do you think a better understanding of your own drafting process will bring to the writing center?"

2. Responses:

Vicki: "I wouldn't even THINK of saving this and coming back to revise it."

Brad: "I am forcing myself to freewrite or draft in my English classes this semester. I cannot verify whether the product is better, but I do not think that the process feels different."

Matt: "O.K., I'll come clean. I am a compulsive drafter. As a matter of fact, even though most of my papers are done a few days in advance, I can

never leave them alone as long as there is time to spare. . . . You know sometimes it can be a self-destructing process."

Abby: "As I mentioned in class today, I think the advantages of talking about these different processes in the conference situation are two-fold. Acknowledging these radically different processes as valid means to an end is an important step in being sensitive to the processes that students may use in their writing. We don't necessarily know what's best for them. Secondly, awareness of the continuum which exists among and within writers can help us help students to feel able to experiment with other processes and not feel as if they are a compulsive, inconsistent writer in doing so."

# # #

3. Peer + Tutor = Authority?

From Matt, Week Three:

I think tutors are like a set of training wheels. Once the student learns how to ride his "writing bicycle," he can simply remove the training wheels (tutors) from his bike.

From Brad, Week Four:

as to tutoring style, i want to be that favorite older cousin whom you knew damn well could play space invaders better than you could, but still played video games with you on thanksgiving like an equal... playing doubles ms pacman until you both got extra lives and got the game down right without "teaching" a word.

From Vicki, Week Seven:

I talked with the student a little and then she read her paper. I took notes and realized her organization was totally screwed up. And then I froze up. I was thinking "non-directive, non-directive, non-directive" and ended up being no help at all. She kept asking me to just tell her how to write the paper. I couldn't help her because I couldn't get across what was in my mind regarding the confusing nature of the paper. . . . What I've concluded is that I had the wrong idea of what being non-directive is. I had NO direction. I was focusing so hard on trying to be non-directive that it stunted my ability to share and be helpful.

# # #

4. Going Public

From Trish, Week Ten:

We're able to see and appreciate one another's bare, unsculpted, unperfected ideas, and get past anything that might get in the way in between.

From Rachel, Week Twelve:

The party line has been great, the printed-out entries like "photographs" I will treasure for years to come. It really helped to converse with everyone in class, to know their thoughts, to feel that I was on a similar wavelength with the rest of the people in class.

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From student interviewed for Computer Services newsletter:

Everyone sees what you have to say and we can share ideas and expand on what we want to talk about. Discussion is not just limited to me and my pen--it becomes alive through dialogue.

# # #

5. Theorizing Practice

From Abby, Week Three:

I thought a lot about where responsibility falls in the tutorial situation, and I have decided, tentatively, that it pretty much all resides with the student. It's not my fault she waited till the day before to come in for help. It's also her decision entirely whether or not to use the guidance I give her. This should make me feel better, but it doesn't. What do you think?

From Ken, Week Eleven:

We will always deviate from the models. That's the purpose of those models: to learn them, and then deviate from them, without compromising from the philosophy of these models. In other words, hell yes the tutor was right by not making the student read the paper, or to encourage him more to do so.

From Ruth, Week, Six:

It seems to me as the semester progresses there are more and more references to our own experiences as tutors when we are trying to grapple with these new concepts in writing theory. I think it is exciting to see how this kind of textbook theory can flower into a more complex and realistic understanding of putting theory into practice. . . . I see theory and practice playing off one another in a circling pattern, where there is no one point of "eureka" (I understand!), but a constant re-evaluation of our old perceptions.